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X
AN EXCERPT FROM "FIELD NOTES FROM DIMENSION X"
CARSON MELL

The moment my craft hit the blackness of the void there was a slight pop and hiss followed by the smell of burnt sugar and total darkness, total silence. I assumed I was dying or about to die. I tried to think of Maria's face, but instead I started thinking about one of those little ball-cup games. I don't know why. I don't even like that game. The more I tried to conjure up Maria's beauty, the more the stupid game stuck. So there I sat, snug in my cockpit, totally sure that not only would I die thinking about the ball-cup game, but die frustrated about it. Then all at once the deathly silence was replaced with a sound like a thousand concrete mixers churning glass.

I opened my eyes expecting to see the vastness of space spread out before me, but instead I was alone in a long, bread-loaf-shaped building, down on my knees and totally naked, my penis humbly retracted. The white, lava-rock walls glowed an even custard yellow. There were several windows so natural in shape and placement that they seemed worn into the walls. Through them, lights sparkled and streaked across the black sky, exploding into showers of sparks as they collided with the ground. I stood and walked to the nearest window, where I saw that the lights were actually reflections off a deafening deluge of huge, black crystals.

There was something else out there too, and with squinted eyes, I realized it was my craft imploding under the storm of crystals like its space-age carbonite polymers were nothing more than styrofoam.

I watched impotent and terrified until it was completely caved-in and then turned to inspect the rest of the room. Lying on the ground at the far end was something that looked like the cap of a shiitake mushroom, only several yards across. Because it kind of looked like a lid, my first thought was that this place must be a bathroom and that it was covering a hole in which to piss and shit.

I walked over and gently poked the thing with my big toe. It was spongy, moist, and warm. Organic. I knelt and grabbed the thing by its side to try and pick it up when it began to vibrate. I staggered back, fists raised, as it rose higher and higher on a thick, wrinkled stalk. I retreated until I was pressed against the opposite wall, and had there been a door, I'd've braved the crystal storm outside to escape the company of the horrible, masked mushroom creature.

I stared at the thing for a moment, my fists now made into open palms to show this being that I carried no weapons. After a moment, I said, "Hello." But my voice could not be heard over the sounds of the exploding crystals.

In response to my mouth opening, several vertical wrinkles all around the creature's mask began to pop open, revealing countless globs of glands like salmon roe, gleaming every color. Different combinations of the glands began to throb, and the room filled with a smell like white wine, then gasoline. Two of the openings snapped shut as quickly as eyelids as three more popped open, filling the room with a smell like fresh-cut grass.

The odors came quick and clear, and after a while I realized that the creature was trying to communicate with me. But what could I possibly do in response? Fart?

Even though the creature had no eyes as far as I could see, I decided to try and communicate in pantomime. I pointed to the wreck of my craft outside, to the sky, to myself. I made a sitting position, flicked my fingers around and twisted invisible stuff, pretending to be at the controls of the craft. I made a circle with my finger and tried to draw the shape of Earth's continents inside.

I acted out the little play one more time but was interrupted when another of the openings snapped open. India ink black glands throbbed, and the room filled with an odor so acrid and sharp that I dropped to my knees and began to dry heave. My eyes wet with tears, I looked up to see thin red tentacles whipping up out of the hole. Before I could get up to run, they got ahold of me, and I was being held down tight against the porous floor.

As a few of the tentacles kept me pinned, another moved toward me with a large white crystal in its grasp. *It's going to stab me*, I thought. *It's going to jam that gnarly crystal up my ass*. I writhed against the floor, soundlessly barking out, "No! No! No!"



The tentacles flipped me onto my stomach with utter ease and the creature let loose the crystal, which hovered and bobbed for a moment before it descended towards me, emitting sparks that were tiny at first, then larger and larger. The sharpest tip aligned itself with my belly button as the bolts of multi-colored electricity rioted up and down my flesh. My stomach began to warm. Then came the soon-to-be-familiar tug from within my intestines and total blackness and the feeling of falling, falling, falling.

It was in that first bout of blackness that a name for the being popped into my head. I know it seems crazy that I'd be thinking of names for things in such a stressful situation, but I swear to God that's the way it happened. Then again a name, any name, would provide some small toehold in this new and twisted reality. So I dubbed the creature Zathurian. My next thought, after *what the fuck was that thing*, was *where the fuck am I?* And as quickly as I'd asked it, I had an answer. *Here I am*, I said to myself, *in Dimension X*.

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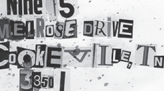
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PRESENTOSA AN EXCERPT FROM "HOME REMEDIES", A NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS NATALIE TILGHMAN

The winter of 1925 was the worst in anyone's memory. Snow regularly reached the second story windows of villas in the Apennine Mountains, but that year, the drifts threatened to cover even the chimneys. The wind complained so often against the roofs that the terra cotta tiles had to be weighed down with rocks. During February, clouds caped the village of Ovino in a shawl, making day almost indistinguishable from night. The bells of the town's ancient church, clanging to signal the start of the daily mass, were the only indication that morning had arrived.

On a particularly dark afternoon, a very pregnant Maria Teresa Agnone snapped on her snowshoes to deliver bread to La Vecchia, the old widow who was rumored to be a *strega* and who made a strong herbal tea that wiped out morning sickness. Maria Teresa needed to get out of the house. Her two boys were wild with cabin fever, and her husband Manodoro—a jeweler who villagers called "Hand of Gold" because he stacked the rings he created on the fingers of his right hand to keep them safe from thieves—claimed that the warmest room for him to sketch new designs was not his office, but her kitchen.

Outside, snow feathered the bare tree branches along Shepherd's Path. A nearby pond gleamed like a pearl. Snow cushioned each step so that Maria Teresa felt as though she were walking on clouds. It wasn't until the path wound around the north face of the mountain toward Lookout Point that snow swirled and the wind began to bully Maria Teresa. A particularly violent gust knocked her into one of the deep drifts. Snow soaked through the back of her coat, and with each attempt she made to free herself, she only sank deeper. Her toes burned with cold. Still, the pain was comforting, for she knew from her father's days working as a *nevorolo*—cutting fresh ice from glaciers during the summer months to sell in valley towns—that the real danger was not her aching toes, but her fingers where she could no longer feel anything at all.

As she attempted to stand, Maria Teresa yelped at the familiar sensation of her womb being ripped in two. La Vecchia had predicted that Maria Teresa would not give birth for another three weeks, but labor clearly was beginning now. Between prayers, Maria Teresa yelled, knowing it was unlikely that anyone would hear her—the snow along Shepherd's Path had been stamped only with fox and chamois prints. Her cries boomeranged off of the mountains' backs, and in the silence that followed, the distant grist mill's wheel slushed through the ice-choked creek and branches clicked together like old bones.

Just beyond the jagged jawline of the pine forest, a whisper of smoke rose from La Vecchia's cottage. The old woman would eventually find Maria Teresa when she left the house in a couple of days to search for wolves' teeth, healing stones, and feathers—ingredients for homemade cures. But, by then, it would be too late. Maria Teresa would be blue-lipped and frozen, the basket of cold bread by her side.



NOISE IS SOMETHING WE FEEL HILAL OMAR AL JAMAL

I love the noise of vacuums and blenders,
of washing machines and dryers humming,
of televisions blaring and children crying,
of a woman sucking her teeth at me and sighing
when she hears me coughing in the basement,
of a stressed love, who calls out my name
as if to say I won't stand you anymore—
I can't stand any of this anymore—

I love those sounds because they pollute the air with
noise. Noise in which I hear our poor songs.
Noise is a real thing, which I can feel,
even when I've taken the medicine I take
so that I won't feel the way she feels—
poor thing—when the noise is all too much
for her to bear.

GOLDEN WATERS JOHN TOTTENHAM

Instead of doing my own work,
I took a long, hard look
at somebody else's work,
in the hope of being pleasantly relieved
by how bad it was.
But, much as I tried to deny it,
it was undeniably good.
And it pours out of him
like a gusher from a golden fountain
that never stops flowing.
Compared to this strained trickle
from a blocked and rusty faucet.
I take consolation
in how much it has cost me,
as if that's somehow redeeming.
Which, of course, it's not.
But I don't have much else
to take consolation in.



The Park People

Tereei Ando

FEATURED ARTIST

Morgan Anderson is an artist and author originally from Phoenix, Arizona. Her work, which is largely inspired by nature and mankind's interaction with it, is both beautiful and haunting. While she often works with different types of printmaking, she is constantly experimenting with new methods of creating art. She is a member of the Tucson, Arizona based band Human Behavior (Folktale Records) but is currently living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana working on her master's degree. We had the pleasure of visiting her there and talking about her work, inspirations, and creative process over a couple of daiquiri's.

So, You have a BFA but are now working on getting your Master's in printmaking. What draws you to printmaking as an art form?

I am actually focusing on a lot of non-printmaking media right now, but I think I am attracted to the process involved in printmaking and the idea of creating multiples. Because I have multiples of all of my images, there is a lot of room to experiment with them after printing. I also really like the process of getting a matrix ready to print; there's a lot of meditative and repetitive work involved, especially with stone lithography or woodblock printing, which I think attracts a lot of printmakers for some reason. Most of the new media I've been working with is also very process driven, so I've been realizing that there must be something about that that interests me.

Did you experiment with many different mediums before deciding to major in printmaking?

I did and still do a lot of painting and drawing, and I also worked with wood and metal a little before grad school. I am currently moving back to three-dimensional work, using ceramics, casting, taxidermy, and making my own paper. I am trying to work printmaking into that in some way, which has been interesting, and difficult, and fun all at the same time.

You made the move from Arizona to Louisiana—two very different places environmentally—to attend LSU. Do you feel that different landscapes influence the work you make?

Right now, I am using a lot of found natural materials in my work, so the landscape that I am a part of greatly effects what I make. However, even when I was in Tucson making two dimensional print work and not using found materials, the desert definitely affected and influenced my prints in some way. It isn't as obvious in my work from that period, but nature is definitely one of my biggest inspirations, so wherever I happen to be, that will be a big part of my art.

What sort of found materials have you been incorporating into your work and in what ways have you found uses for them?

I have been using a lot of found animal parts like bones, fur, and shells, as well as live and dead insects, rocks—those sorts of things I use very directly in my art. I also indirectly use found materials by making plaster molds of them and casting them in clay slip. I have been working a lot with embeddedness, so I've been embedding natural objects in a translucent paper that I've been making. But I hope to do much more with my found objects in the near future.

Not only does nature play a large role in your work, but also you have a degree in Wildlife Studies. What is it that interests you about this field, and how has it affected the work you make?

I think the way that I explore art is the same way that I explore science. And printmaking involves a lot of experimentation that really parallels science. I've always been fascinated by plants, animals, animal behavior, and ecology, and I think pretty much all of the conceptual basis of my work revolves around one or many of those subjects. I am also very interested in the complex relationship between humans and the natural world, especially in the scientific realm.

Apart from nature playing a large role in your work, what else do you draw inspiration from?

Right now, I find myself very inspired by Anne Sexton. I'm pretty obsessed with her right now—and probably forever. The imagery she can capture with words is stunning.

She really toes the line between beauty and darkness in a way that I'm always trying to get at. I've also been reading about burial and death rituals across cultures, cabinets of curiosities, and scientific illustration. I'm a very research-based artist, so reading always helps me with my work.

Anne Sexton's work is very personal. Is that something you're drawn to in other people's work?

Yeah, I suppose I'm drawn to work that is more personal to the artist that made it.

Are there any other authors who have influenced your work?

I really like Kelly Link. Her stories are amazing and pretty constantly on my mind right now. They are dark and strange, and I love them. I am drawn to darkness in visual art and in my own work.

What do you mean when you say you are drawn to darkness?

I'm very attracted to the idea of darkness in nature: a fear of the unknown, a fear of the uncontrollable. I am currently exploring death as a theme in my work, which can be seen as a dark topic.

What is your creative process like? Do you you have an idea of what the final outcome will be when you start working on a piece, or do you develop things as you go? Do your methods change depending on what medium you're working with?

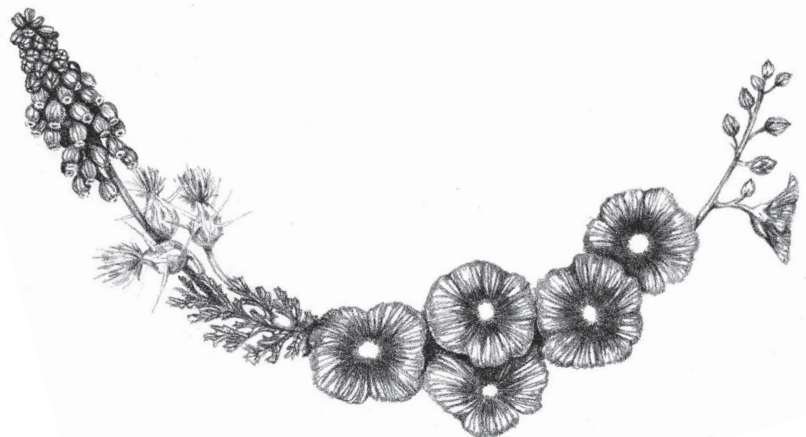
At the moment, I'm working with all new materials, so I'll usually have an idea of what I want, but that initial idea doesn't necessarily factor in my skill set with the particular materials at hand. I usually have to end up shifting the idea in some way to focus on my strengths while I'm still learning new things. So there is a balance between the risks I take and the comfort zone I stay in. My methods definitely change between media, depending on how well I know it and how long I've been working with it. I'm building a lot of new skills right now, but there is definitely a learning curve involved in moving from primarily 2-d work to 3-d work or vice versa, which has greatly affected the way I work.

What are your reasons for creating visual art? Is it something you find beneficial to you personally? Is there a larger message you want your work to convey to others?

I really love it. It's hard to describe without sounding lame, but I definitely feel like I have to do it to be fulfilled in life. I can't imagine not doing it; it's just who I am. I don't really have a larger message that I want to communicate right now. My art is concept-based, but I'm more interested in creating visually interesting things that convey a feeling rather than a specific message. I also don't really care if people totally understand what I'm getting at right now, but that might change later down the road as I become more comfortable with my new work.

What's one thing you would like to accomplish, either with your work or in your life in general?

I just want to get to a place where I feel comfortable with my skills to make what I want. I have so many ideas for 3-d pieces that I just do not have the skills to accomplish yet. I'm getting better though, so hopefully that's not too far off! Otherwise, I just want to keep making art for the rest of my life, whether it be my job or a side-thing.



See more work by Morgan Anderson online at: www.morganandersonart.com





LAWN FURNITURE TONY PRESLEY

He woke in the bed of a truck that was parked in someone’s driveway. The day was already hot and he blinked away the bright sunlight and felt a heavy weight behind each eye. His body slowly stirred to inventory the stale blood at the back of his throat, loose teeth, grit beneath his tongue, barking scab on his chin that bristled against his shirt, ears that felt muffled, a goose egg like a leaden softball, and finally his hands felt like boxing gloves. Then a sickening flicker of still frames came—a gravel parking lot, a tire iron swung and singing through his body like a low bass note bleeding into shrieking feedback, a yowling coyote caught in a floodlight. Then, a second dream, so similar to the first and comforting in its sameness, came to him. How in it he had predicted the pain and had pictured a dozen canoes all converging in the center of a pond and then turning away from each other; how he felt memories that had been trapped in marrow all those years unmoored and flowing warmly on bone chips through his arms and toward his heart that pumped whiskeyed blood back out to eddy within his hands.

There was a slow ache through his entire being, a full-bodied loneliness that felt like the punchline to every joke he’d been too afraid to guess out loud, every mistake he’d ever made. He turned onto his stomach and wept, his body shuddering against the dirty steel of the truck bed, his forehead banging, tears pooling beneath his face. He hated himself for still being alive, hated the way his body felt on the mornings after.

The pick-up truck and the house were a long two miles down a state highway with no shoulder. He wondered how he’d made it that far, how no one had hit him and ended his life, wondered how no one had stopped to help him.

He walked back up the road to the gravel parking lot and the bar. He was dizzy in the morning heat, fresh blood overtaking the thick darker blood, alcohol sweat stinging his eyes. There was a beer delivery truck in the parking lot, a driver sweating through his blue Dickies work shirt. He wiped his brow with a towel, whispered, “shit, man,” and gave Caleb a ride to the emergency room.

Someone called her from a hospital in Missouri. She was confused. *Was it Ricky? How had he gotten to Missouri? No, it was Caleb.* It was her brother.

He was in a hospital in Missouri, and she couldn’t talk to him because he was unconscious. But they would call her back after the surgery and let her know how it went. They told her about the pins and screws they were going to insert into his hands, how everything was going to work the way it did before. She smiled into her phone and said “good luck” to the woman on the other end of the line.

She was standing on the loading dock behind the grocery store she worked at. She finished her cigarette, looked at the time on her phone, and lit another one. She stared out at the overgrown lot that the loading dock faced. There was a large sign that offered the land for sale. Susannah had been looking at that sign for 10 years. It was the only man-made thing she saw in that direction. Everything else was just West Texas sprawling out to meet the sky.

She finished her cigarette, picked up her stubbed-out butts, and walked back inside.

She told Ricky about it when he got home from work. It was her idea to let Caleb stay with them while he healed. Caleb hadn’t yet thought about what he’d do while his hands healed. He drifted in and out of morphine sleep in his hospital bed and didn’t know he’d been evicted from the motel room he rented by the week or that his things were locked in a storage room alongside cleaning chemicals. Susannah didn’t know that either, but she knew he’d need some help. She called the hospital again and found out when he’d be released and where the nearest bus station was.

Ricky had only met Caleb one time; it was in the period after he and Susannah had gotten married and before his first tour in Afghanistan. Caleb had come through town flush with cash, and they had a barbecue in someone’s apartment complex. At one point, Caleb went on a beer run and came back with 6 cases of Budweiser. There were probably only 8 or 9 people at the barbeque, but Caleb and Ricky stayed long after everyone had left and kept drinking. Susannah was happy seeing them together and then later furious at Ricky for having walked home alone at dawn. Ricky passed out on the couch, and she drove back to the apartment complex to fish empty beer cans out of the pool and splash water on Caleb’s face. It had taken her a long time to rouse Caleb, and by the time he’d awoken, her hysterical tears had all but dried. He’d leave the next day to return to the oil fields in Oklahoma he’d been working in.

She called the hospital two days later and was able to talk to Caleb. He was groggy, childlike, and easily confused. She and Ricky couldn’t take the time off work to come get him, but she’d bought him a Greyhound ticket he could pick up at the bus station and there was a cab driver that was going to take him there from the hospital.

The bus left St. Joseph, Missouri late that night and zig-zagged through Oklahoma all morning. He saw the same oil field he used to work in and the downtown Tulsa bars he used to drink at. He was broke, though, and anyway, they weren’t open yet. He meted out his pain pills from the hospital, dozed off, and drooled against the window. After a layover in Muskogee, a black kid sitting with his grandmother across the aisle silently placed an oatmeal creme pie and a Sprite in his lap and she had whispered, “See, now that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

It was a 23-hour bus ride, and each stop was a small temptation. He could get off the bus, walk off into the late afternoon, and find a flat roof to sleep on, a dumpster to scavenge food from. Then he looked down at his blue casts sitting stupid and heavy in his lap.

Susannah was at the bus station to meet him, smiling the same sad smile she’d had when she was a kid, one snaggletooth inexplicably overlapping her bottom lip. A wave of shame engulfed him when he saw her through the bus window. He wanted to lock himself in the bathroom at the back of the bus and wait until she left.

She hugged him gently, his arms at his sides, and picked up his small suitcase. Ricky was waiting in the car, adjusting the radio dial and smoking a cigarette. Susannah opened the back door for him and Caleb slid in. It was late, but they went through a drive-thru and ordered some fried chicken, honey biscuits, and some fries. Susannah leaned over Ricky and politely yelled the order into the intercom.

They ate on the back porch, Caleb balancing soggy fries on the fingers of his cast and guiding them toward his mouth. Susannah cut strips of chicken off the bone and placed them on a paper plate for him, but he waited until she’d gone inside to throw some trash away before he funneled the plate above his mouth and slurped the chicken in.

After they were done eating, Susannah refilled his soda cup with milk and he sipped it while looking out at the handful of lights down the hill. Ricky said goodnight and silently opened and closed the sliding door. Caleb could feel Susannah looking at the side of his face.

“Why am I even here?” He felt his cheeks get hot and heard Susannah take a deep breath.

“Where else would you be?”

“I’d be fine. I can take care of myself just fine.”

“How, Caleb?” Her voice was calm, sweet. Hearing her like this, all these years later, only made him angrier. “We just want to help how we can.” She turned her body to face him. “We’re here for you until you get back on your feet.”

Caleb looked down at his casts, felt an anger welling up inside him.

“My hands,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“Not my feet, my *fucking* hands.”

He stood and the soda cup with milk fell to the patio and spilled out, reflecting the porch-light. He walked over and stopped in front of the sliding door, hot tears on his lashes. Susannah rose and opened it for him—told him goodnight.

He woke on the couch a few hours later, shivering and needing to piss. His casts were tangled up in the sheets, and he spent a few minutes untangling himself before he stumbled to the bathroom. He pissed on the floor and on the seat before he righted himself. He knocked a hand towel to the floor and mopped it around with his foot before he went back to the couch. His hands and wrists ached at dozens of small checkpoints, and he closed his eyes and pictured tiny men with their papers, pictured miniature paper-cuts against his bones.

He unzipped his suitcase with his teeth, found his packet of pain pills, and was able to shake out three of them into his mouth. He walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge. He was looking for beer, but there was only milk and iced tea. He drank some more milk and felt the pills travel down his throat.

When he woke again, it was late in the afternoon and he was home alone. There was a note from Susannah, a sandwich already made for him, and a travel mug with a straw filled with milk. “Where the fuck am I? Milk City?” He just wanted a beer and a shot of whiskey, wanted to be able to scratch the itch between his right index and middle fingers. He pawed at the sandwich and watched TV for hours. He was asleep again when Ricky and Susannah came home.

They ate dinner inside at a small table in the kitchen. Susannah had made mac ‘n’ cheese and sliced up hot dogs.

“I’m not a little kid, you know.”

“I know that.”

Ricky ate his quickly and watched the television that sat at the corner of the table.

“I don’t even know why you care so much. It’s not like I told the hospital to call you.”

“I know that, Caleb.”

Ricky finished his dinner, leaned back, and lit a cigarette.

“Will you please talk to him about what we talked about earlier?” she said to Ricky. She cleared his plate and went to the sink.

“Um. Suze wanted me to see if you needed some help with the bath or... anything like that.”

“Ha.” Caleb looked away at the TV for a minute and then down at his casts.

“I mean, Suze brought home some Ziploc bags and some rubber bands. I can just help you put those on.”

Caleb stared at the TV again for a minute.

“Sure, yeah.”

Ricky helped him get undressed in the bathroom and placed a clean towel on his lap. He sat on the toilet seat, and Caleb sat across from him on the edge of the bathtub while he fitted the plastic bags and tightened the rubber bands. Susannah had already set out some clean clothes. Ricky started the water for him.

“How’s that?”

“Ah, shit! Too hot.”

“Sorry, man.”

When the bath filled, Ricky turned off the faucet.

“Say, you got any beer around here? I just want a beer.”

He looked away from Caleb.

“Aw, man. Suze don’t want you to have any of that while you’re here.”

“You gotta be kidding me.”

Ricky got up to leave.
“I’m sorry, man.”

She sat on the patio and smoked and watched the orange clouds on the horizon deepen and turn purple. She smoked half a cigarette, put it out, and then lit it again. She’d made the mac ‘n’ cheese and hot dogs because she remembered her mother making that when Caleb and their father had come to visit. And she wanted him to remember that too.

She and Caleb shared a father, but not the same mother, and her childhood was made up of long stretches of boring loneliness punctuated by her father and Caleb’s unannounced visits. Her father had been an eclipse, she thought, solar or lunar, which-ever was rarer.

Caleb was six years older than her and at twelve had wanted nothing to do with a curious six year-old. She remembered how she had followed him around the farmyard and asked him about school in his town.

“I don’t go to school,” he’d said.

She’d had asked him if he played on a baseball team, if he had a dog.

“Leave me alone. I’m not even your real brother.”

He’d all but said that tonight, she thought. That farmyard feeling came back to her. Ricky snored quietly next to her, and she could hear Caleb adjusting and re-adjusting on the sofa. She got out of bed and watched him from the dark hallway. He was shirtless, and she could just make out the horrible tattoo on his arm that he’d shown up with at 12. She remembered how she had asked him about that back then.

“Is that a real tattoo?”

“Yeah, of course it’s real.”

“Is that a kitty cat?”

“No, dummy. It’s a wolf.”

“It looks like a kitty cat.”

She remembered his face, how he’d strained his neck to look down at the side of his arm, and the small smile that conceded.

“A little bit, yeah.”

She stepped out of the hallway and into the living room. Caleb looked up at her from the couch.

“Can’t sleep.”

“I heard you. Um. I guess I’m just wondering if there’s anything you need.”

“Well, these damn itchy casts are driving me nuts.” He held them up. “And my pain pills fell under the couch.”

“Yeah, hold on. I got something.” She went to the kitchen and sorted through a drawer filled with batteries and condiment packets and found a fuzzy orange pipe cleaner. “Let’s try this.”

“It looks like a caterpillar.”

Susannah went back to bed, but it was still a long time before she fell asleep. She thought of her father’s tattoos. He’d had so many. He’d always been happy to show her the one of the old man’s beard in his armpit and the permanent mustache tattooed along the side of one of his fingers. He had other tattoos she’d seen on other men in her life—a rattlesnake on one forearm, a Confederate flag over his heart. She remembered how he would sit at their kitchen table sweaty, shirtless, and sun-red and bounce her on his knee, call her a frog-girl, ask her why her skin was green. “My skin’s not greeeeen,” she’d squeal.

She thought of how secretly happy she’d been when Caleb had come to live with them the first time, when he was fourteen. Their father had been shot and arrested. He died a few months later in prison, but Caleb had lived with them until then, until he found out. Then he ran away.

He was back. Ricky was back. And she didn’t want to lose either one of them ever again.

Caleb ran out of pain pills the next day, and Ricky brought some home from the retirement home he worked at. Caleb dry-swallowed some in the morning and then surfaced in the afternoon with one still tucked in his cheek, chalky and at first mistaken for another broken tooth. He was shirtless and shivering from the air conditioning, sick of day-time television and of living on a couch. He went out to the patio and sat down in a lawn chair, his pores already awakening to the afternoon heat.

He remembered how restless he’d been when he and his father stopped in to visit Susannah and her mother, how he’d paced the farmyard like a cat in the zoo. He felt like that again, unable to

be anywhere else. That waiting to leave again had been like a string of Christmas Eves. Finally he would wake one morning with his father smiling over him whispering, “Let’s go.”

They had stolen lawn furniture, repainted it, and sold it on the side of the road. Every once in a while someone would pull over and look over furniture they thought was theirs, shake their head, whisper “motherfucker,” and get back in their car.

They had stolen other things too—bicycles, weed eaters, shovels, push mowers, and one time a stack of four tires that still had plenty of tread left on them. These they sold to Mexican men at the flea market across the border in Arkansas, who had sold them to other Mexican men.

He’d wanted his entire childhood to go on like that, traveling with his father and falling asleep in the bed of a truck at night with Cheeto dust on his lips and Dr. Pepper film on his teeth.

He was asleep when Susannah came home from work. She sat down next to him and watched him, open-mouthed and sweating in the Texas evening. She forgot about the ice cream in her bag she’d gotten specially for him. She sat there for a long time. Ricky came home and stood next to her and she wrapped her arms around his waist, leaning her face against his side.

When Caleb finally woke, it was dark and the first thing he saw were their cigarettes glowing orange, like very close stars.

WHITE BLOOD CELLS JASMINE DREAME WAGNER

1 I wake in the dark at the lip of the canyon. When light breaks on the desert pines, I rise and take one last stroll down the incline. That’s when I see the ram. He looks at me with a walnut eye. He lowers his head to show me his horns. They are heavier than all of his bones.

2 In El Paso, the border police are confused by my houseplants. I can’t abandon my houseplants. When I was a kid, we had a rubber plant named Julio who grew so tall he scraped the ceiling, and when Julio turned brown, I couldn’t eat. Pothos, Ficus, Bleeding Hearts. Hens and Chicks and English Ivy. I drive across the country with a car full of leaves.

3 Speeding past midnight in the central lowlands, I hallucinate a blizzard. I’m so dizzy, I almost vomit. I drool uncontrollably. I skid to the side of the road and stagger from the car onto dirt. Inhale the hot air in the headlights. The haze of hot dust. The sky above agape with stars. The hood of my car isn’t frozen. It’s encrusted with the bodies of thousands of moths.

4 That’s the way I wrote back then: I wrote scenes for an audience of one. I wrote as though I were sending him postcards. I wrote as though I were driving towards him. It doesn’t mean that I knew him. He was a song I might have written late night as I drifted off. How did he go? Where was I driving? I wanted to live out the rest of the record.

5 In San Antonio, I crash on the couch of a friend I met on the internet. She drives me to the dive bar where Nirvana played their first show in Texas. We drink Lone Star, then drive to the Alamo even though it’s closed. We use a disposable camera to photograph her friend who’s recently split her tongue like a lizard. The lizard tongue is blue. She’s drinking a blue raspberry Slurpee.

6 When I arrive in Atlanta, I drive in circles—so many circles it’s almost holy.

7 My friend from college lends me his parking space in Chapel Hill. He drives me to Duke Gardens in the humidity, and we duck beneath foliage and find more foliage. We lie for a while at a black lily pond. Any man with a microphone can tell you where to find what you’d thought you wanted. A friend will allow you to find nothing at all.


8 There is a field we drive to at three in the morning, bundles of blankets in our arms. We lie side by side, under the blankets, under the frost, real frost, and watch the meteors. One is green as lichen. I throw my hand in the air and spread my fingers. That’s how long the tail is. A meteor the size of my hand.

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